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ATG Special Report -- Looking Beyond eTextbooks and Tapping into the Personal Learning Experience

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ATG Special Report — Looking Beyond eTextbooks and Tapping into the Personal Learning Experience

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The article in the December 2010-January 2011 issue of ***Against the Grain*** (v.22#6) by **Sara Killingworth** and **Martin Marlow** of **Maverick Outsource Services**, titled "The Future of the Textbook," brought to life some very interesting research and viewpoints on eTextbooks.

In the article, the authors asked many important questions about eTextbooks, such as: How are students and faculty using them? Can they be easily integrated into the workflows of students, faculty, and the institution? Do they really enable and support the evolution of learning and teaching methods and increasing student engagement in their academic study? Are they delivering the core content in a cost-effective way that enhances and expands the future of higher education? And what will these products look like?

At **Cengage Learning**, we've been asking these same questions for quite some time. We recently announced results of a survey we conducted in conjunction with **Eduventures**, an industry leader in research and consulting for higher education institutions. The survey, "Instructors and Students: Technology Use, Engagement, and Learning Outcomes," was designed to explore both instructor and student perspectives on educational technology and its impact on engagement and learning outcomes in higher education. Some interesting results were revealed.

Student and Instructor Opinions on Technology, Engagement, and Learning Outcomes

We learned that college students today have a lot of distractions, and challenging schedules make it even harder for them to focus. Nearly half of today's college students hold jobs, and 30 percent reported being distracted by external responsibilities such as raising families or by financial issues, like paying for school.[1] On top of that, students are entering school lacking essential skills, which is significantly impacting their ability to study. On average, instructors believe that one in four students (27%) enter the classroom without basic math or literacy skills.

Nonetheless, students and instructors believe there is hope on the horizon in the form of educational technology — they strongly believe that technology can help improve engagement and learning outcomes. In fact, 86 percent of students surveyed reported that their academic engagement and learning outcomes have improved as they have increasingly used digital tools in their coursework. When asked which technologies will have the greatest impact on student engagement, instructors and students ranked online libraries and databases at the top (44% of instructors; 49% of students), followed by eTextbooks (32% of instructors; 31% of students).

How Do We Define an eTextbook?

Often when we think of digital tools for education, the first product that comes to mind is an eTextbook. And although **Killingworth** and **Marlow** write that there is no definitive standard for the eTextbook, they believe "the market will demand interactive content with robust tools to manage it….Elements such as self-assessment, multi-media, content editing, annotations, text highlighting, as well as the ability to 'slice and dice' content to meet course needs, all present excellent opportunities for educators to expand student knowledge and achieve greater grade potential."

We agree. All of these items are important elements to ensure the success of eTextbooks. And students have not been shy to adopt new technologies that can support eTextbooks. In fact, the growth of e-readers, tablet, and slate devices among college students has been remarkable. If current purchase intent is realized, more than half of college students (56%) will own a slate/tablet by 9/30/11.[2]

However, most *current* device owners (over 80%) use their device for "non-school use," with just over 50% using it "for schoolwork."[2] One can argue that to-date as an industry we have not adequately translated the textbook experience digitally, which is also demonstrated by the fact that 75% of U.S. college students still prefer print textbooks.[3] We cannot simply hand students a pdf file of a printed textbook and send them on their way.

As **Killingworth** and **Marlow** note, we need to think beyond an eTextbook, a course delivery platform, or a Learning Management System and think about a student's Personal Learning Experience, or better yet, help create that Personal Learning Experience for them.

A New Direction in Higher Education – The Personal Learning Experience

This Personal Learning Experience needs to be device agnostic, giving students access to their course materials anytime, anywhere — on their desktops, laptops, tablets, or mobile phones — and offer a variety of digital learning apps and services that combine leading authoritative content with powerful technology. Instructors need a solution that allows them to seamlessly deliver appropriate content to students when and where they need it, including the ability to support offline learning activities. It must be open, allowing content and technology assets from a number of providers, including commercial partners, institution- and instructor-sourced applications, and open community software and content sources to be implemented.

To answer the age-old question of "how do we better connect the library with the classroom?" let's go ahead and incorporate library resources directly into course readings. Rather than asking students to navigate a complicated discovery tool when they visit the library, let's create a window into the library, and put library resources in context with readings and assignments, exactly where students are doing their coursework.

The Personal Learning Experience will give students the ability to highlight and take notes as they would with a printed text. Based on pedagogically sound principles, the Personal Learning Experience will also incorporate activities and interactive exercises, quizzes, assignable homework, and multimedia content such as videos, podcasts, and images. Students will be able to collaborate with peers through applications that drive lecture capture and social networking opportunities, and are accessible for visual and audible learners, using text-to-speech tools.

On the other side, instructors need to be able to track students' use, activities, and comprehension in real-time, allowing opportunity for early intervention to influence progress and outcomes. Instructors need to have the ability to customize the curriculum — with modifiable learning paths, their own content elements, configurable assignment activities, apps to drive other activities — and make adjustments "on the fly," making it possible to intertwine breaking news into their lessons and incorporate today's teachable moments. Designed to work on any LMS, it needs to take advantage of an institution's existing investments.

Introducing…..MindTap

Cengage Learning has been listening to the needs of instructors and students, and paying close attention to developments in the education space. That is why we've developed MindTap, the first product in a new category of Personal Learning Experiences. MindTap is device agnostic and open, allowing content and technology from a number of different providers to be implemented. It allows library resources to be directly incorporated into coursework, in context with assignments. It's accessible and gives students the ability to collaborate with peers and even tutors in real-time. It can be customized or personalized through its unique app platform. Conversely, it gives professors the ability to customize curriculum and incorporate their own resources, and enables them to track student comprehension in real-time. MindTap addresses many of the pain points and needs previously discussed by **Killingworth**, **Marlow**, and others in the educational space.

Currently, several institutions are piloting MindTap, and more titles across many disciplines are available for use in fall courses to members of the Early Adopter Program, a selective program available to qualified institutions who want to become fully immersed in the digital experience. If you would like to learn more about MindTap and the Early Adopter

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ATG Interviews Deborah Kahn

Publishing Director, BioMed Central, *www.biomedcentral.com*

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: I see that you are charged with leading the publishing teams to provide an excellent experience for authors, editors, and referees, and for ensuring that BioMed Central continues to grow its portfolio of open access journals. What are your approaches in this regard?

DK: STM publishing exists to support the research process. As publishers, we need to continue to ensure that we meet the changing needs of researchers. At the same time, those researchers are getting more demanding. Traditionally, the economics of research publishing were hidden from authors, with all financial transactions carried out between the library and the publisher. In open-access publishing, authors are much more aware of the cost to their institution or funding body of publishing their research. As a result, they also recognize that they are our customers, and they are clearer about the levels of service they require. At **BioMed Central**, our aim is that authors will be keen to submit their future papers to us and to tell their colleagues to do so too. So we work hard to ensure that their experience is a good one, all the way through the process from submitting their article through to the final publication, and beyond. We survey our authors twice, once on submission and once on acceptance, and we ask them about their experience, and we pay close attention to the ratings and comments we get from these surveys. Happily they overwhelmingly say they will publish with us again and will recommend us to their colleagues, but we are always looking to improve on that. So we work hard to make sure that our peer-review processes are fast, fair, and friendly, and that we continue to provide excellent author service and improve our processes to cope with an ever-increasing number of submissions to our journals.

ATG: Are there specific examples where author responses to your surveys have resulted in a change in the way BioMed Central meets author needs?

DK: It is a system of continuous improvement. Our customer services team monitor all author surveys and send on any comments to the relevant head of department. Any suggestions for improvement are investigated, and the respondent receives a personal response. We then make changes to our processes accordingly. For example, we are currently revising our production processes to combine a number of communications that we have with authors, so that we can reduce the load on them, as this is something we have had a number of comments on. Other examples range from appointing additional Associate Editors for a particular journal to improving peer-review times in areas where we need more Editorial Board coverage, through to enabling additional formats that authors can upload as supplementary files, to major improvements in download times around the world.

ATG: And how have the approaches to OA changed over the history of BioMed Central?

DK: As the pioneer of open-access publishing, **BioMed Central** had to forge the way — to prove to the world that quality of research published, the peer-review process, and the Editors or Editorial Boards which serve on open access journals are every bit as good as those for traditional journals. We are proud to number many leading scientists amongst our Editors and Editorial Board Members, and to publish journals with some of the highest impact factor rankings in their JCR fields (see for example Tropical Medicine, and Veterinary Science). Now that that argument has been well and truly won, and everyone else has decided to get into the game, we need to remain the leading open access publisher.

ATG: Do you have any sense how the growth of open access has impacted traditional journal publishers? Has the competition improved the quality of their efforts? Do you think that subscription prices have been affected downward? Or, perhaps more dramatically, does the success of open access prove that the traditional subscription-based model is unsustainable?

DK: You would really have to ask a traditional journal publisher how it has impacted them! From the outside, we can see that many of the traditional publishers are now offering open access in some form. Most started through offering an open-access option within their subscription journals, but now more and more can see that open access offers additional options, for example, allowing them to launch new titles in a market where starting new subscription journals has become extremely hard. Some journals have reduced subscription prices where there has been significant take-up of the open-access option, but generally I don't get the impression that subscription prices have been affected downward. I imagine that open-access revenue has helped to subsidize the subscription journals and allowed prices not to rise as much as they might have. No, I don't think that the success of open access proves anything about the sustainability of the subscription model, and as far as the future is concerned, I believe that open access and the subscription-based model are likely to coexist for a long time to come.

ATG: Your career has spanned STM journal and book publishing, database publishing, and research and consultancy. What and when in your background did you become an open access advocate?

DK: It has always seemed obvious to me that the peer review and dissemination of research results is an integral part of the research process. Also, I have always had a problem with restricting access to scholarship, which should be publicly available to anyone. So I think I have always been an open access advocate, since long before the phrase was coined. As early as the mid-1990s, when the first electronic journal experiments emerged (at **Chapman & Hall**, for example, we were beta-testers of **Adobe Acrobat** with the CAJUN project, which with **Wiley** and the **University**

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Program, we invite you to visit us at *www.cengage.com/mindtap*.

In this ever-changing educational space, it is crucial that we create learning solutions that are as efficient and effective as possible. We plan to keep listening and learning from our customers in order to discover better ways to serve them and address their needs.

Endnotes

1. Instructors and Students: Technology Use, Engagement and Learning Outcomes, Cengage Learning/Eduventures Survey, December 2010.
2. Omnibus Survey, OnCampus Research and the National Association of College Stores, November 2010.
3. OnCampus Electronic Book and E-Reader Device Report, On Campus Research and the National Association of College Stores, March 2011.